

Healthy Living Center

Getting Regular Checkups

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It's wise to get a checkup on a regular basis, no matter how old you are. Why? We know from numerous studies that people who are seen regularly by a physician tend to be healthier overall than people who aren't. Even if you are young, vibrant, and in good health — there's reason to be seen by a doctor. Regular visits mean you'll get vaccinations on schedule (which are highly effective in preventing illness), appropriate screening tests for your age (for example, any sexually active woman, regardless of age, should be getting a regular Pap smear to test for cervical cancer), and risk factors (such as high cholesterol or high blood pressure) identified that increase your chance of disease. Additionally, you'll have established a relationship with a doctor, should you ever become ill and need immediate care.

Of course, depending on your age, gender, and medical issues, you'll need to make visits with increasing frequency and see a variety of different types of practitioners. Nevertheless, even if you're healthy and young — you should have, at minimum, a general practitioner or family physician who can keep your immunizations up-to-date, administer flu shots, and prescribe medications; and a dentist, from whom you are receiving regular cleanings and checkups. If you're a woman and your general practitioner doesn't do routine gyn care, then you should have a gynecologist as well, in order to get regular pelvic exams, including Pap smears. As you age (see charts) you'll need to visit more frequently, depending on the screening tests you need and the medical issues you have.

Of course, one of the challenges we face as we age is the number of doctors we see (the dentist, eye doctor, general practitioner, obstetrician, gynecologist — and then the specialists, cardiologists, gastroenterologists, rheumatologists, etc.) and the problem of coordinating communication among them. Whatever your current age, start keeping good medical records if you don't already. Note every time you see a physician: reason for the visit, tests ordered, and all results. If you are offered copies of test findings, including

imaging tests like X-rays and mammograms, take them. If they're not offered, ask for them. These can become invaluable later; and it's best you have them all in your possession, rather than trying to collect them later from a myriad of doctors' offices.

If you are a woman and are considering having a baby, there are a number of ways your health-care provider can help you prepare for a healthy pregnancy *before* you ever become pregnant. Experts are now saying that the prenatal visit — the first visit to the doctor after you know you're pregnant — may be too late for an optimal outcome, and they are urging women to make *preconception* visits to their health-care provider. Many of the steps you can take to have a healthy baby need to be taken *before* the first few weeks of pregnancy, when harmful factors — like alcohol, certain drugs, smoking, infections, diabetes — have their strongest effect on the developing fetus. So, be sure to have a checkup before you conceive.

As you age, the type of screening tests you should undergo and the frequency change. The following two tables — one for women and one for men — outline which tests you need at various ages.

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